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ABSTRACT

The coupling behavior of school systems was examined in this study of how school districts attempt to control and supervise alternative programs. Four alternative high schools for actual and potential dropouts, run by community-based organizations but dependent on local education agencies (LEAs) for student referral and program accreditation, were used for the case study. Two assumptions underlie the study: that school systems are loosely coupled organizations with little supervision over their main product--instruction; and that schools derive their legitimacy from their social milieu. Data were collected through interviews, observations of interaction between the alternative schools and LEAs, and analysis of documents setting down formal commitments and requirements. The study found that LEA administrators exhibited much control over areas that affected the school's legitimacy, particularly over key areas such as the definition of what constitutes "teacher," "student," and "subject matter." Supervision of course content and instructional methodologies was scant. The study concluded that administrators exhibit tight behaviors in areas that affect the school's societal functions and have little bearing on the school's legitimacy. (Author/JM)

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LEA RESPONSE TO RIVAL EDUCATION DELIVERY AGENTS: SOME EVIDENCE OF TIGHT AND LOOSE COUPLING BEHAVIORS

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SUMMARY

The existence of an alternative high school for actual and potential dropouts, run by a community-based organization but dependent on the LEA for student referral and program accreditation, is taken as a case study to examine instances of tight and loose coupling behaviors by school systems. The implementation of the same alternative high school model in four different LEAs provides comparative data.

The study uses as an explanatory framework two complementary perspectives: (1) the notion that schools behave as loosely-coupled organizations, with little supervision over their main product: instruction, and (2) the view that schools are institutions that derive their legitimacy from their societal mileu.

Very similar behaviors were shown by the four LEAs. In conformity with theoretical expectations, the study found that LEA administrators exhibited much control over areas that affected the school's legitimacy, particularly key categories such as what constitutes "teacher," "student," and "subject matter." Ambiguity was expressed over categories not previously encountered such as "potential" or "actual" dropout, and new courses such as "career awareness" and "career exploration." Supervision of course content and instructional methodologies was scant.

The study concluded that administrators exhibit tight behaviors in areas that affect the school's societal status but loose control in areas that relate to internal functions, which have little bearing on the school's legitimacy.

In recent years, the concept of "loose coupling" has been found to be a useful device toward understanding organizational behaviors. It has tempered our overly rational view of organizations by showing the fragile ties between intention and action (March & Olsen, 1976). It also has brought attention to the fact that certain organizational elements are linked very tenuously and/or infrequently and that these weak linkages perform, at times, important functions (Weick, 1976; Prebble, 1978).

"Loose coupling" is a concept that has received a variety of meanings; Weick, for instance, mentions 15 possible definitions (1976). Used to refer to "infrequent inspection of activities" and "a relative lack of coordination," the concept appears particularly well suited to describe educational organizations. As interest in schools as organizations increases and empirical studies of their behavior are conducted, it is becoming noticeable that beyond the school's facade of hierarchical positions, division of labor, specialization, and known and stable procedural rules, there are a great number of uninspected activities, particularly in the core function of the schools: instruction.

The prevailing technological view of organizations posits that, over time, organizations tend to become more rational and to develop highly efficient means of coordination and control regarding their processes and main output. And yet, schools present administrative structures that bear little demonstrable relationship to what goes on in classrooms and to what students learn. Why does this occur?

The imperfect connection between structure and core activities could be attributed to the limited knowledge (weak technology) that still exists in education, where there is no clear understanding of how students best learn, even though there is a widespread awareness that numerous interaction processes occur in learning situations. Perrow (1970) predicts that organizations with a weak technology and nonuniform products tend to exhibit a high degree of discretion at all levels, though he also forecasts coordination through mutual feedback of information. A competing explanation of the imperfect connection between structure and core activities is that

organizations that derive their meaning and value from their societal context, develop behaviors that (a) preserve the status and role given to them by the society at large and (b) show little concern over the evaluation of their internal activities and inspection and control of their subunits. This view, first proposed by Meyer (1975) and Meyer and Rowan (1975), maintains that schools function primarily to maintain the social definition of "education" and that they do so mostly by paying much attention to the categories composing this social definition, namely "teacher," "student," and "course topic." They explain:

> Our argument hinges on the assertion that education is highly institutionalized in modern society. Its categories of students and graduates, as well as its ritual classification of production procedures--types of teachers, topics, and schools--are all derived from highly institutionalized rules and beliefs. Educational organizations derive power and remain in close conformity with such categorical rules. (Meyer & Rowan, 1978, pp. 80-81).

This second perspective of schools as societally defined organizations maintains that the weak relationship between structure and core activity in schools is an intentional outcome. By de-emphasizing evaluation and control processes and outcomes, schools minimize the possibility of finding conflicts or inconsistencies in their operations, and thus reduce the danger of losing credibility vis-à-vis their sponsoring society. This perspective further asserts that schools engage in ceremonial behaviors dealing with the categories defining education. These behaviors are ceremonial because they follow elaborate rules for classifying people and actions into the key categories making up education and yet show little follow-up of daily activities.

The institutional, as opposed to the technological, view of educational organizations predicts areas of tight and loose coupling. The former are expected to occur whenever issues relate to categories such as teacher, student, and topic, since these are externally sanctioned categories. The latter are expected to occur in processes such as classroom instruction, actually delivered curriculum, and the evaluation of school outputs.

Although the theory of schools as institutionalized organizations is clear both in the explanation of school behaviors and in drawing a number of consequences from them (see Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the number of empirical investigations is small. These studies include Cohen, Scott and Meyer (1975), Meyer, Scott, Cole and Intili (1978), and Rowan (1979), all of which dealt with a data base derived from a stratified random sample of approximately 188 elementary schools; Abramovitz and Tenenbaum (1978) survey of 1,448 high schools; and March and Olsen's (1976) series of case studies based on various types of educational organizations in various countries.

The purpose of this paper is to provide further evidence on the behavior of school systems as institutionalized organizations. It was thought that by examining the reaction of the LEA to a rival education delivery agency, namely an organization outside the school system, critical and well defined behaviors could be detected and isolated. By focusing on the reaction of four LEAs operating in different contexts to the establishment of an alternative high school in the community, comparative data are used to increase our understanding of the conditions under which schools will exhibit tight and loose coupled behaviors.

The Stimulus

The instances of LEA response considered in this paper derive from a "replication" project subsidized under the YEDPA legislation.[1] This project concerned the implementation of an alternative high school officially described as designed for actual and potential dropouts. This alternative high school (hereafter referred to as the AHS), had been developed and implemented by a predominantly black community-based organization under the auspices of HEW and, later, NIE. A review of its evaluation by the Joint HEW/NIE Dissemination Review Panel in 1977 judged the AHS an "exemplary program."

[1] The identity of the project as well as that of the sites where it was implemented will not be revealed inasmuch this knowledge is tangential to the purposes of this paper.

According to the AHS model, the program was described as a career-oriented program with a career-infused curriculum, individualized instruction, personalized counseling, the provision of work exploration (hands-on experience), and the earning of academic credit to enable program enrollees to obtain a high school diploma. The AHS would offer an intensive program that would reduce almost by half the time needed for graduation from high school. It was to operate in a separate physical setting and have its own staff and administration. Funds for start-up and operations were funded by the Department of Labor, though some in-kind support would be requested from the receiving LEA.

In the replication project, the AHS was set up at four different sites throughout the country: two large urban sites, one medium-sized city, and a semi-urban community. At each of these sites, the LEA was requested to collaborate with the AHS by approving its curriculum, granting academic credit to students in the program, and awarding a high school diploma after course completion. Additionally, the LEA was asked to provide the AHS with lists of students who had dropped out of school or were at high risk of doing so. Other support would include the provision by the LEA of in-kind services such as transportation, lunches, and use of gym facilities. The incentives for LEA collaboration were to be that certain youths would receive an educational treatment more appropriate to their needs and, financially, that the LEA would have an increased ADA and thus greater funds from the state as all AHS participants (youths who were out of the high school or would have likely left it) were placed on LEA rolls.

The additional fact that the AHS was implemented at the same time in the four sites and dealt with a similar population of enrollees permitted a natural control of two important organization variables: maturation time and salience of the program to the dominant organization.

Altogether, the presence of the AHS represented a very similar stimulus to the LEAs in the four sites, since it offered similar incentives and made identical demands.

Analytical Strategy

The implementation of the AHS is taken as the stimulus to examine instances of loose and tight coupling behaviors by the LEA. Organizational responses considered in this study focus on the behavior of the LEA toward the AHS rather than on their interaction. These behaviors relate to activities on issues that had to be conducted by the LEA in order to accept the implementation of the AHS. They are: (1) the placement of the AHS within the structural configuration of the LEA, (2) the approval of the AHS staff, (3) approval of courses, (4) the award of credit for these courses and the granting of high school diplomas, (5) referral of potential enrollees to the AHS, and (6) the establishment of ongoing communications with the AHS.

Coupling behaviors are defined herein as the linkages between structures and control/inspection activities. Specifically, it refers to the degree of monitoring and controlling activities by the LEA toward the AHS.

Assessment of the degree of inspection and control exhibited by the LEA is made through a combination of indicators. The explicit mention of the issue or activity by the LEA and its inclusion in formal documents or agreements, the delegation of an LEA person to deal with the issue or activity, and the requirement by the LEA that the AHS perform on a routine basis tasks related to a given issue are taken as manifestations of tight coupling behaviors by the LEA. In contrast, the lack of activity regarding a given issue and verbal references to a given issue without any concrete action are considered as reflections of loose coupling behaviors by the LEA. This judgment, while not precise or quantitative, rests on behaviors exhibited by the LEAs over a period of two years, from the inception of the AHS in December 1977 through the end of its second year in December 1979.

Proponents and analyists of loose coupling behaviors advocate the use of highly contextual methodologies (March & Olsen, 1976; Weick, 1976).

Their consensus is that to detect loose couplings, the researcher should be able to observe both what is and is not being done. Weick also recommends a comparative study of organizations in order to detect "invisible" sources of coupling that might be embedded in certain contexts (Weick, 1976).

The strategy followed herein is that of focusing on a few behaviors that bear direct relevance to the acceptance of the AHS by the LEA. In that sense, the study is not open ended. On the other hand, the study is comparative: by examining the reaction of LEAs in four sites to a similar stimulus, it is possible to distinguish organizational responses to the stimulus alone from organizational responses that reflect particular contextual conditions.

Data Sources

Data used in this study derive from a larger study that dealt with the implementation of the AHS by the community-based organization. Information was obtained through a variety of methods. Interviews--both structured and informal--took place with key LEA administrators and AHS staff during a series (four) of week-long visits to the four sites. Observations of procedures between the two organizations and the interaction between LEA and AHS staff were made. Documents establishing formal commitments and requirements by the two organizations were analyzed.

It was noted earlier that the study covered events from the establishment of the AHS in late 1977 to its second year of activities. Data thus describe the initial response of the LEA as well as its routinized responses.

Findings

When approached by representatives of the community-based organization about the possibility of letting this organization operate an AHS,

top administrators in all four LEAs reacted enthusiastically to the idea of having a special program for youths who might not or could not "make it" in the regular high school. From the statements made by school administrators, a factor accounting for the willingness of the LEA to welcome the AHS was the fact that the AHS had been previously field tested under an NIE grant, that an evaluation of the program had found it to be effective, and that it had been considered by the Joint Dissemination Review Panel as an exemplary project. As one associate superintendent stated, "We hold NIE in high esteem. We were very excited when we learned the AHS had been developed by NIE. It adds credibility."

The main considerations of the four LEAs in accepting the AHS were that it should comply with existing state laws regarding the provision of academic credit and that it should allow the LEAs to claim program enrollees as part of their ADA. Beyond these criteria, acceptance of the AHS was facilitated by factors such as LEA financial need, previous experience with alternative program, and sympathy for the program.

Placement of the AHS within the structural configuration of the LEA. A great deal of attention was devoted in the early formal negotiations between the LEA and the AHS to determining the status of the AHS within the school district.

The LEA at Site A, which had a large system of alternative programs and schools within the district, reacted by incorporating the AHS as one more alternative program under its jurisdiction, thus bringing the total number of alternative high school programs to 17, in a system with twelve regular high schools and approximately 17,000 high school students.

Sites B and D, which had various alternative programs, reacted by making the AHS an alternative program within the high school that fed it the most students. At Site B, a very large urban LEA (approximately 260,000 high school students) with overcrowded high schools and a tradition of strongly autonomous high schools, the AHS first operated as an alternative program for one single high school, but as other high schools began to

refer students to the AHS, it functioned as an alternative program for the other high schools also. At Site D, where an LEA almost as large as that in Site B existed, the AHS functioned as an alternative program to one selected high school. Even though, over time, as many as eight high schools referred students to the AHS, it was the selected high school that could claim the referred students in its ADA.

At Site C, the semi-urban community with a small LEA (1,400 high school students) and no experience in alternative programs, considerable time was spent by LEA administrators checking the legality of cooperating with the AHS. They contacted state educational authorities to ask about curriculum approval, made inquiries as to standards the building of the AHS should meet, and wondered about credit award. When told by state officials that the LEA could approve its own curriculum subject to basic state guidelines and informed that other LEAs had accepted the AHS as a program affiliated to the main feeder school, the small LEA decided to do likewise.

To coordinate school district/AHS procedures, the AHS proposed the position of "school liaison," a person who would either be appointed or approved by the LEA. The "school liaison" position was intended mainly to procure lists of potential students for the AHS and to facilitate the collection and upkeep of transcripts. There was limited discussion of this role and the arrangement was promptly approved by all four LEAs, although the LEA in Site A decided to have two additional curriculum coordinators and later an attendance clerk. A further indication of the limited attention given to the "liaison" role was the fact that over time only two of the AHSs saw the need to have a specific person for the role. In the two other cases, staff in various positions took care of the "liaison" role.

In retrospect, the placement of the AHS within the LEA followed the path of least effort. Where there was a parallel alternative system, the AHS became part of it. In cases where high schools kept a great deal of program autonomy, each referring school considered the AHS an optional

program within its instructional offerings. In other cases, the LEA chose the high school that was to "offer" the AHS. The particular placement of each AHS reflected substantial LEA concern for existing district organizational structures and practices. Tight coupling was shown in making sure that the status of AHS within the LEA was unambiguously defined, and jurisdiction over AHS students was clearly specified. On the other hand, the low importance given to the position of "school liaison" suggested that even in regard to a rival delivery agency, the LEA showed scant concern for defining clear monitoring and coordination procedures.

Approval of AHS staff. A condition imposed by the LEAs for the granting of academic credit was that instructors in the AHS be "certified" or "certifiable" teachers. This issue emerged early in the negotiations and was a persistent one. All four LEAs adduced that state laws dictated that "professional employees shall be fully certified for the positions to which they are assigned" and that there could be "no exceptions."

Notwithstanding their acceptance of the different type of instructional treatment that was to exist in the AHS (very individualized instruction, personal attention, and interest in the "whole person" as opposed to academics only), the LEAs were firm on their requirement about the certification of instructors. Even in Site D, where top LEA administrators were very sympathetic to the idea of a program for actual and potential dropouts, an official stated: "They [the AHS] got problems because they hired people looking for one thing, while the district must look for people with certain requirements."

The demand for teacher certification, however, showed several signs of being a ritualistic form of tight coupling by the LEA. The procedures by which AHS instructors could become certifiable varied a great deal from site to site (as state laws vary) and thus "certification" scarcely meant a shared degree of competence among instructors. Further, in those sites where teachers would be "certified or certifiable," LEAs were satisfied if the instructors were at least "certifiable," which meant that they were taking courses toward certification.

At Site A, instructors in the AHS soon discovered that they could gain certifications if their petition to the state department of education was endorsed by LEA administrators. To that effect, they used "a little LEA outside the city," even though the LEA of which the AHS was now a part was a different one. At Site D, where several AHS instructors did not have teaching credentials, these individuals were asked to enroll in courses toward obtaining the credential; but after two years of program operation, there had been no inquiries by the LEA toward the progress of these individuals. Apparently, their "certifiable" status was sufficient. In Sites B and C, AHS instructor selection had resulted in the hiring of certified instructors, thus no special behavior by the LEA took place.

Further evidence of the tight yet ritual coupling behavior toward "certification" as a means to ensure proper instruction was produced by two instances. First, the AHS did not have a plan for substitute staff. Having a small cadre of instructors, absenteeism by instructors affected other AHS instructors, as they had to take care of additional classes. Yet, the LEAs show no interest nor concern in developing a substitute staff procedure for the AHS. In fact, only one LEA agreed to help the AHS with substitute staff, and this occurred after 15 months of AHS operations. Second, the LEAs showed much concern in making sure the AHS had "certified" or "certifiable" teachers. Yet, they did not exercise particular care in making sure that the certification of teachers was rigorously applied to the subjects they taught. In several instances, instructors at the AHS taught outside their areas of certification and this was not detected, or challenged, by school administrators.

A second important category within staff concerned the counselors. Again, the LEA response was to enforce that which was explicit in its state educational laws. In Site D, where counselors had to "have a teacher certificate and 18 hours of counseling and guidance to become proficient," LEA officials demanded the AHS to have certified counselors. In contrast, in Site A--where counselors do not need certification--the issue of "proficient" counselors never arose.

The AHS in Sites B and C operated in a state that requires certified counselors. However, in neither site was this specification enforced. This is difficult to explain. In these two sites, teacher unions presented considerable opposition to the establishment of the AHS: at Site B because it questioned the selection of the feeder school (the union considered its principal "anti-union" and wanted no deals with him), and at Site C the union feared that the existence of the AHS would draw students from the regular high school thereby producing teacher terminations there. One plausible reason for these two LEAs' lack of enforcement of the counselor credential might have been that enough problems already existed.[2]

Approval of courses. Approval of the curriculum offered by the AHS took, in all four sites, two characteristics: first, it involved a prolonged, formal documentary process; second, academic courses that were approved were made to fit the topics and titles of courses given by the regular high schools in the district.

Although the AHS had its own core curriculum in the areas of science, English, social science, and math, these course guidelines and their accompanying instructional materials received second priority as AHS instructors had to comply with LEA guidelines for "approved" courses. (Many AHS instructors, however, gave as a reason for not using the prescribed AHS curriculum and materials the fact that there were not "well designed" or "suitable" to the students).

The LEA effort in demanding conformity with the regular curriculum was explained by administrators as "a matter of keeping our standards pretty much the same." Recalling the process of curriculum approval, the associate superintendent in Site C stated, "Our department heads saw the AHS curriculum and they have concluded it is almost comparable to our high school."

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[2] It is observed that this issue was not directly probed with LEA authorities by the researcher for fear of bringing this issue to their attention and, thus, leading them into action.

Showing the LEA concern with maintaining established topics and titles of courses is the following statement by the assistant regional superintendent in Site D regarding the recognition of English 101:

> I met with the curriculum department people. I told them it would be totally unrealistic to have a low achieving student and give him the ninth grade curriculum. I told them that we can take English 101 and make it a class where students would get basic skills. So we kept the basic terminology but changed the content.

Recognition of courses offered by the AHS but not the regular high school, namely those linked to the career orientation of the AHS, met with idiosyncratic responses on the part of the LEA. A key course in the AHS was the "Career and Counseling Seminar," which conveyed information about the skills needed to obtain and maintain a job, the qualifications associated with various occupations in the labor market, and later provided the student with a two-week observation/experience in a selected occupation. This course was accepted as a social studies course in two sites where the LEA offered a social studies sequence (a "sequence" being the equivalent of what in college is termed a "major"). In other LEAs, where there was no social studies sequence but a business sequence, the "Career and Counseling Seminar" was accepted as part of the business sequence. In the LEAs where there was neither a social studies nor a business sequence, the course was accepted only as an elective. In Site B, where each high school has a tradition of program autonomy, the AHS found itself having to accommodate to the response of each high school referring students to it. In Site A, where the AHS had status as one of the 17 alternative schools in the district, the course was accepted only as an elective because courses approved toward the high school diploma requirements were "only those approved for the rest of the school district."

Although the process of course approval took a considerable amount of time (ranging from 4 months in Site B to 18 months in Site C), this delay reflected more a lack of quick resolution by the LEA than a close examination of proposed AHS curriculum and instructional materials. In Site C, where the process of course approval involved reviews by the

high school curriculum committee, then the department heads, and ultimately the board of education, AHS instructors commented that, "The reports from the high school were superficial. Several teachers came from the high school, they talked briefly to the director [of the AHS], talked to some teachers here, and then wrote the reports. They were here one morning". One instructor, referring to the process of undergoing review by several committees from the high schools said, "Everytime they asked for my courses, I submitted the same course descriptions. I simply changed the titles." In Site D, where the LEA accepted a large number of courses peculiar to the AHS, a supportive LEA authority said about the curriculum approval process, "It took a couple of meetings with the downtown people."

As described above, exactly what the LEA accepted as a "course" was rigidly—if not carefully—defined by three LEAs. Yet, in Site D course definition and approval was affected by the sympathy of LEA administrators toward the program and the ability of the instructional supervisor at the AHS to sell the program. Part of the LEA support was linked to the ethnic affinity between school authorities and the students served by the AHS. An LEA official thus stated:

> We have here a black superintendent, a black regional superintendent, a black board of education chairman. The three top people in the system are black. I'm sure they all came from a situation similar to [AHS] students and they can understand and relate to them.

For her part, the AHS instructional supervisor stated:

> You had to convince them that learning not only occurs in school. In this state's laws, the high school principal is given complete authority to approve credit and course of study. So you move here from the principal to the region superintendent. You must study the law and make sure you aren't breaking precedent.

In consequence of this mutual effort, the AHS at Site D received credit for courses such as work experience, field trips, "out-of-school experiences," and intensive counseling.

Altogether the LEAs were willing to approve courses that "seemed" identical to those in the high school. Tight coupling was exercised in the names of courses but loose coupling in their actual content. A key course offered by the AHS, but not given in the high school, achieved legitimation only if it could fit the LEA course structure.

Award of course credit. As in the case of course approval, the award of course credit was formally and explicitly decided by the LEA.

Site A adopted an inflexible position of granting one credit for 120 hours of class work. As a result, it did not accept a key feature of the AHS, namely its ability to offer the students an accelerated program by which students could compress in twelve weeks work normally done in a semester. Although the AHS was permitted to operate on twelve-week terms, credit earned during that time was computed as representing that accomplished in half a semester.

Sites B, C, and D did accept the accelerated program, but their rationale for it did not show much complexity. LEA administrators in Site B took time to "determine the amount of time a student must spend in a public high school to receive a diploma and the supervision required by school district personnel in order to classify the instruction as being under school district supervision," according to the AHS director. They concluded that "work could be done outside the school, as long as the activity was monitored by an instructor, and the student kept record of the time allotted to the activity." Site C never made an issue of the accelerated nature of the program. A possible reason for this might have been that the LEA there was inexperienced with alternative programs and, ultimately, was convinced to accept the AHS on the basis that there was a precedent for it. Site D accepted the fast feature of the program because the supportive LEA official concluded that, "It was clear in their [the AHS staff's] explanation to me that the student could satisfy that requirement through work study, career experience, writing extra reports, and attending different conferences and field trips."

Courses received as many credits as the LEAs traditionally gave them. Needless to say, there was variation in the number of credits a given course produced in each of the four sites. The most extreme illustration of this credit disparity occurred in the case of the "Career and Counseling Seminar." As Table 1 shows, the number of credits earned for this course represented from 2.8 to 15.7% of the credit needed for a high school diploma.

Table 1

LEA Credit Award for Career and Counseling Seminar by Site

Site	Credits Needed for HS Diploma	Credits Given for CCS	CCS as % of Credits Needed for HS Diploma
A	29	2	6.2%
B	38	6	15.7
C	16	2	12.5
D	180[a]	5	2.8

[a]Refers to credit hours.

In all sites, the award of credit was linked to the amount of time the student would be involved in the activity, not the effort put into it or the complexity of the task. The difference in behavior among LEAs resulted from their attitude toward counting as "time" only that spent in a classroom or within the school as opposed to that outside the building. Their attitude, in turn, did not seem shaped by strong technical considerations.

Referral of students. As indicated earlier, one of the LEA's tasks in cooperating with the AHS involved the identification of "actual" (already out of school) and "potential" (likely to leave school) high school dropouts

the AHS would then contact for recruitment. The process in which the LEAs engaged to elaborate these lists revealed both a great deal of loose coupledness within the LEA regarding the definition of these two categories. This process also showed a great deal of variability depending on local conditions.

In the case of "actual" dropouts, it turned out that LEAs do not deal with this category of youths (which, in fact, is the opposite of the category "student"). Further, they avoid the use of the term. Site A had a "placement office." Students with 20 absences and/or disciplinary problems were terminated from the regular high school and referred to the "placement center," which then would assign them to an alternative high school. Site B had a "bureau of attendance," which kept a "discharge list" composed of names of students referred by high school principals. In addition, however, principals kept a "Z file," where "long term absentees" were placed. Site C did not have a list of "actual dropouts," although the LEA could identify those students who did not re-enroll or who were terminated because of discipline or being over age. Site D had an attendance office that produced daily an "over age referrals" list. Such a list, however, contained students of various ages who were leaving the school for a variety of reasons, ranging from pregnancy to "needing to have a job."

As requested, all LEAs provided the AHS with lists of "actual dropouts." Recruiting staff at the AHS soon realized that these lists were useless. Describing her experience using the list, a recruiter at Site C stated: "There were 500 names on the dropout list. The phone numbers were no good or had been disconnected. Many of the addresses were vacant houses or empty lots. We were lucky if we found 10 youths." AHS staff at Site A said: "The list we obtained from the placement office contained 3,500 names. Six hundred could be located that had enough number of credits and age. Of those, eventually 14 came to the program." And in the case of Site B, AHS staff concluded:

> Those addresses were very old. Of every 100 letters we sent from the list, we got back 80 of them. Since the LEA gets funded on its ADA, sometimes we find that someone who

should have been off the record for a long time, is kept there. They only terminate students when something special happens.

From the LEA perspective the "actual dropout" lists could not be very accurate because "they become outdated in no time. Students who leave the high school are [residentially] mobile." Yet, other plausible reasons for the low usefulness of the "actual dropout" list seem to exist. First, there is no socially sanctioned need for schools to be concerned with nonstudents. In fact, most states have compulsory attendance laws that oblige youths to attend school until they are 16 years old. Many LEAs, therefore, define as a "student" persons who are within the age limit. Youths not attending school are simply considered "nonattenders" rather than dropouts or nonstudents. Second, since schools receive state funds on their ADA count or enrollment formula, it works to their financial advantage not to have a strict definition of what constitutes a dropout.

Like the identification of the "actual dropout," the selection of "potential dropouts" by the LEA was also a nonroutine task. It revealed a great deal of loose coupledness between LEA administrators, counselors, and teachers.

Who is a "potential dropout"? The definition turned out to reside mostly in the respective student's counselor and to represent a combination of criteria weighed differentially by each counselor. Indicators used to identify "potential dropouts" included: poor attendance, behavioral problems, personal problems (economic situation, pregnancy), having earned fewer credits than their peers, and lower grades than the student's "potential." Describing who is a "potential dropout," an LEA counselor at Site C explained:

> It's a combination of those who have irregular attendance, usually low achievement, and those who have serious personal problems such as home problems, not relating with parents, young lady with child, young man with no source of income. We judge each case individually and we consider attenuating circumstances.

Although the definition of "potential dropout" rested with counselors, the selectivity of these persons appeared to be subordinated to attitudes by higher LEA administrators. At Site B, where the main feeder school had student/teacher ratios that exceeded legal limits, school authorities admitted that, "One of our needs is to reduce the number of students in the main building. It serves us well to have the AHS." In consequence, at Site B the process of identifying "potential dropouts" was smooth and swift. In Site D, the one with the friendly LEA, counselors at the school initially made the identification but with successive recruitment waves, the LEA agreed to let the AHS recruit on campus. Then the definition of "potential dropout" eventually became a matter of self-definition by the students.

Contextual factors in Site C, where the LEA had faced and would face in the future teacher reductions due to declining enrollment, made the process of "potential dropout" identification a protracted activity. The school used a procedure by which counselors referred various student names, which were then checked by teachers, and finally approved by the principal. The result of this procedure was that the original list was substantially reduced by the time the principal endorsed it. Defending this identification procedure, the school liaison from this high school argued so:

> I cannot see how you can do this in mass. My principal says, "I will not sacrifice 100 of my youngsters without doing proper investigation of each youngster." We are trying to do this in a humanistic and a legal way. Parents would raise a lot of hell if you say, "Your youngster has to go to the [AHS]."

Yet, in a more candid moment, the same person stated:

> We have 15 students per teacher at present. If 150 students were to leave the high school during the year, the board will scrutinize that very closely and say, "With 1,150 students, we can conceivably fire 10 teachers." By law and contract, the board can do this. This is what we are most afraid of happening.

On-going communications. As described above, early negotiations between the LEA and the AHS centered on issues such as courses, credits, staff, and identification of students. Over time, the most frequent coordination between the LEA and the AHS revolved around the issues of attendance and transcript record keeping. To a lesser extent, coordination included also issues related to the in-kind support provided by the LEA, such as lunches and transportation.

Although most of the students referred by the LEA had been previously characterized by having poor attendance records, all LEAs imposed their attendance policies on the AHS. At Site A, students in the AHS had to be terminated after 20 "unexcused absences" per semester. At Site B, the AHS reported attendance to the LEA, whose policy was to terminate students after 20 "consecutive absences." The Site C LEA had "no fixed rules for attendance." Yet, it held the AHS responsible for 70% attendance (or 14 absences per term) because "it had been promised so in the AHS design." Site D attendance policy was 18 "unexcused absences" per semester.

Attendance was an activity closely monitored by the LEA. At Site A, the LEA placed an attendance clerk of its own at the AHS to compute attendance on a daily basis. Site B and C computed their own attendance but had to report it daily to the feeder high school by a set time. Site D reported weekly to the LEA.

Attendance information was used by the LEA in three ways. First, it was employed to define "students" enrolled and thus to receive ADA from the state. AHS staff at Site B noted attendance there was used for positive (claiming ADA) rather than for negative (terminating students) purposes. Attendance information was also used to determine the "validity" of the credits earned by the AHS student. As an LEA staff member assigned to the AHS at Site A stated, "We are concerned that some students are earning credit when they are not meeting the attendance requirements." Concurring with this opinion, LEA officials at Site C argued that, "For an education there has to be attendance. It cannot be spasmodic." Third, attendance information was used to support ongoing LEA standard operating

procedures. This was the case at Site A, where automatic student terminations were used to feed the alternative high school system with needed enrollees.

The LEAs' concern with transcript record keeping was related to their enforcement of course approval and credit award. The LEAs made sure that courses listed in the transcript were those formally approved by the LEA and that the number of credits per course was that sanctioned a priori. Grades were not challenged except in those cases where LEA personnel on site could remember that some students who had been frequently absent had been reported as passing their coursework. The AHS had to report courses and grades to the LEA with the same frequency as other high schools in the district. This occurred despite the fact that one of the key features of the AHS was its "individualized instruction" and the ability to have students "proceed at their own pace."

Monitoring of actual instruction at the AHS by LEA personnel simply did not occur. In the friendly LEA site where LEA officials claimed that "a great deal of contact" had occurred with the AHS, the assertion was correct insofar as several meetings had taken place between LEA curriculum personnel and the instructional supervisor and director of the AHS. There were no classroom visits, except for a short visit by the principal to an AHS "open house."

In Site A, where the LEA curriculum consultants were perceived by AHS staff to fulfill a "quality control" function, these individuals examined course descriptions, the number of class hours, and the number of units given for these courses. They also gave advice to AHS instructors about prescribed and other available textbooks. However, they did not visit actual classrooms.

At Site C, the least supportive LEA, the principal of the feeder school expressed much concern with the quality of instruction given at the AHS:

> The key issue with the AHS is the validity of those diplomas we'll be handing out. Can a parent or teacher who walks in there see something that's comparable to what goes on in the high school? I don't want to give a cheap diploma.

Asked if he had visited classrooms, he responded: "Our school liaison keeps an eye on what goes on at the AHS. We have gotten some negative feedback about teachers we didn't hire." But, when the school liaison was asked if he visited classrooms, he said: "Only what I see as I go down the hall, but please don't quote me."

The prevailing lack of monitoring and observing of actual instruction, however, did not prevent the LEAs from manifesting definite opinions about the AHS. Thus, for instance, the associate superintendent at Site D affirmed:

> We are very happy with the AHS. The city needs it. We had one student. His mother said he'd hung around. He wouldn't go to school for love or money. Then, when enrolled in the AHS, she never had to call him once to go to school. His mother told me the other day he is going to [a] Community College. That's great!

In contrast, authorities at the Site C LEA noted,

> There is this young man who was in our high school. We never saw him for two semesters. Then, he earned credits at the AHS. How could he have completed eight credits in one cycle? How do we know he studied? If the agreement with the AHS is renewed, we are going to look very carefully into it.

Clearly, in either case, these opinions were more reflective of the administrators' personal attitudes than based on carefully assembled knowledge.

Conclusion

In terms of amount of attention and degree of explicitness, the reaction of the LEAs in dealing with the AHS was basically that of preserving

current definitions of what constitutes "teachers," "topics," and "students." Teachers were defined as individuals with a teaching credential or likely to obtain it. Courses were defined as those approved by the board or the state department of education and being taught by other schools in the district; in consequence, despite differences in content, courses given by the AHS were given approval under labels of courses given by the LEA. Students were defined as those meeting LEA attendance standards. Graduates were those who meet the high school graduation requirements.

The behavior of the LEAs toward the AHS reflected much of the LEA behavior toward its own schools. According to the theoretical expectations propounded by Meyer and Rowan (1978), the LEAs insisted on using standardized types of curricular topics and teachers to produce standardized types of graduates. And, again according to theoretical expectations, the classification of what was a teacher, a course, a student was carried out according to formal regulations and in a ritualistic manner. These categories were classified as such by referring to state educational laws or to school district guidelines, seldom by specific inspection of instructional technologies used by instructors, depth and variety of subject matter covered in class, and their choice of curriculum materials.

Altogether, there were limited instances of LEA accommodation to the different nature of its rival education delivery agency. Irrespective of the basic features announced by the AHS regarding its philosophy and treatment of students, the LEA forced it toward isomorphism with its regular high schools. Thus, no significant formal allowances were permitted in the definitions of teacher, topics, and student categories. (Yet, despite the standardization imposed by the LEA, the AHS was able to deliver a different treatment, one characterized by individualized instruction and personalized counseling.)

There were, however, important deviations by the LEA in their treatment of some of these categories. These differences appear to have been caused by contextual conditions. Two LEAs did not enforce state laws regarding the certification of counselors. As noted, one of these LEAs

had excess students and wanted to give some to the AHS; the other LEA seemed too inexperienced to realize all issues. Another significant deviation occurred in the classification of career education experience as "course" and its respective "credit." The findings indicate that where effective support existed for the AHS, concern with a precise definition of the "course" category eased up, while in sites where the LEA was less receptive, the school district invoked the need for isomorphism with the other high schools.

A third issue showing considerable variation among the LEAs involved the identification of "potential dropouts"--these being almost the opposite of the category "student." Differences in the identification of "potential dropouts" can be attributed to circumstances such as sympathetic administrators, threatening teacher unions, and excess students in the feeder high schools. A plausible explanation for the salient role of particular circumstances in the definition of "potential dropouts" may be the fact that while schools have been concerned with the definition of "student," they have not in the past dealt with "nonstudents." In consequence, when confronted with an issue that has no clear societal sanctions, the LEAs reacted idiosyncratically.

In sum, this study showed that the LEA was very specific about defending key established categories that maintain its social definition. On the other hand, the LEA showed little concern with inspecting and controlling actual instruction in classrooms. Accountability was enforced by means of record keeping: recording courses, units, grades, and attendance. The differential treatment given by the four LEAs to issues such as "counselors," "career education experience," and "potential dropouts" suggest that new categories meet with uncertain behavior by the LEA. A likely development, in the light of LEA responses herein reported, is that as these issues become socially sanctioned categories, they will become part of the standardized, ceremonial routines by the LEA.

Some Policy Implications

The behavior shown by the LEAs toward the AHS in this study supports some assertions about LEA behavior toward other rival organizations. The issue of "rival organizations" is likely to become a very important one because federal policies to decrease the structural unemployment of youths are considering the establishment of programs outside the school to meet the needs of poor, minority youths who do not succeed in the regular school. Specifically, proposed amendments to the YEDPA legislation consider the involvement of nonprofit and profit agencies in the provision of training and work experience, with the expectation that these will be sanctioned by the school system.

The findings from this study indicate that LEAs are very protective of what they will recognize as "teacher," "course," and "credit" categories. The findings suggest that success in attaining LEA flexibility with respect to these categories is likely to be minimal as it is not dependent on the negotiator's ability as much as on the sanctions given to LEAs by society and enforced through state laws or board of education approval.

If rival educational agencies are set up to deliver qualitatively different educational programs, these programs and their related components will have to be approved at the state level, by educational authorities there. To leave approval of new and different educational programs to the discretion of local arrangements is likely to engender three situations: (a) LEAs will fight for their exclusive right to grant accredited education, i.e., to give the high school diploma; (b) negotiations between LEAs and rival educational agencies will be characterized by prolonged, uncertain decisions; and (c) LEAs will force rival educational agencies toward replication of the traditional high school.

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